

Delta Ponds Floodplain Restoration Project Summary – *Spring 2012*

Delta Ponds is a City of Eugene owned natural area in the heart of Eugene, Oregon. At one time the Willamette River flowed through the Delta Ponds every winter, providing important habitat for fish and wildlife. Over time as the Willamette Valley was settled, agriculture, urban development, and flood control changed the nature of the river. Levees were built to contain high flows, dams were constructed to reduce flooding, and riparian forests were cut down to make room for crops and houses. Side channel habitat was lost throughout the Willamette Valley; so much so that today very little of this kind of habitat remains.

This loss of side channel habitat likely contributed in part to the listing of spring Chinook salmon in the upper Willamette River in 1999. Adult Chinook salmon return to the upper reaches of the Willamette River every year to spawn. Several months later juvenile salmon begin the long journey out to sea. These young salmon are not very strong and seek slower moving water, particularly during the winter months when flows in the main stem of the river are high. Side channel habitat, like what was found here at Delta Ponds historically, provided an important refuge for young salmon to feed and grow before moving out to sea.



While many restoration projects throughout Oregon and the Pacific Northwest have focused on improving spawning habitat for salmon, the focus on improving habitat for juvenile salmon is more recent. The Delta Ponds provides a perfect opportunity to restore some of this critical rearing habitat. In the 1950s and 60s the Delta Ponds were mined for gravel for use in building local roads and highways. These operations left behind a series of shallow ponds along what was the old overflow channel. Reconnecting these ponds to the river and to a remnant slough would recreate 2 miles of side channel habitat.

With this in mind, the Delta Ponds restoration project was launched in the late 1990s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers with the City of Eugene as the local sponsor. While reconnecting the ponds to the river to provide habitat for juvenile salmon is a primary goal, other goals include improving **water quality, enhancing habitat for other wildlife** such as Western pond turtles and neotropical birds, and **providing recreational and wildlife viewing opportunities** for the community.

Some of the accomplishments that this project has achieved to date include:

- Removal of invasive species, such as Armenian blackberry, on nearly **60 acres** of land.
- Planting of **75,000 native trees and shrubs**.
- Conversion of **5 miles of steep banks** left over from the gravel mining days to gradually sloping riparian benches made up of valuable wetland, emergent and riparian habitat.
- Construction of recreational facilities including **several miles of trails**, boardwalks, bridges, and overlooks that allow the community to view wildlife right in the heart of Eugene.

The hydrological connections to the river were implemented in stages. The first major connections were made in 2005 and 2007 and the final connections were completed in late summer 2010. The first flows through the newly connected ponds took place in fall 2010.

While the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been the lead on this project, the City of Eugene has worked hard to bring in other partners, including federal, state, and local agencies, and local community groups. Numerous grants, as well as ARRA (stimulus) funds, have contributed important funding for this project.

The Delta Ponds project is a great example of a green project that benefits the environment and enhances the livability of the Eugene area.

For more information contact the Natural Resources Coordinator at 541-682-4925.

